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using assessment as a basis for improvement

by Thelma Harms

Improving the quality of early childhood programs has become a public policy priority, not only in the United States but also in Canada, Europe, and Asia. As programs are given increasing amounts of public funds, more systematic oversight of program quality is being required. Because of the absence of federal regulations in our country and the wide difference among state regulations, the professional early childhood educational community has had to be both innovative in developing voluntary programs for quality improvement and persuasive in convincing local, state, and federal governmental agencies to support them. For example, in the United States many states are conducting voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) which provide a variety of incentives for programs to meet higher levels of quality than their mandatory licensing standards. It is also common practice for sponsored school readiness programs to require a standardized quality observation tied to the additional funding provided to them.

Because many of these programs are conducted under various auspices in a wide variety of settings, including child care centers, public schools, and family child care homes, it is essential to conduct observational assessments using

valid and reliable instruments to assure comparable quality. The Environment Rating Scales (ECERS, ITERS, FCCERS) are the most widely used instruments for quality assessment in both the QRIS and the school readiness programs. Several other classroom observations are also used, including those designed for accreditation by professional organizations (NAEYC, NAFCC, etc.), CDA credentialing, and other instruments.

Early childhood program staff often ask why they have to undergo an additional assessment since they already have had a licensing visit and meet the state standards. Meeting licensing standards is the first step in the quality assurance process. Licensing standards are designed to address basic structural features such as staff:child ratios, facility safety and space, and health and safety policies to protect children. These standards must be set at a low enough level to assure that enough programs can meet them to supply care for children. In contrast, quality assessments are designed to see how well the program is providing daily for the care and development of the children enrolled in the program. The quality assessment requires an observation in the facility to judge how well the practices are being carried out to protect children's health and safety, create a

nurturant social-emotional environment, and provide appropriate learning opportunities. Therefore, the requirements in the quality assessment often go beyond the basic licensing regulations to see whether conditions for optimal development are present.

The usual procedure for a classroom assessment requires that an official assessor, who is very well trained to use the scale accurately, spends from 3 to 4 hours observing in one classroom or family child care home. After the observation, the assessor arranges for a time to ask the teacher questions about



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things that are not readily observable, such as the nature and variety of the extra materials available for rotation into the classroom, or the information given in writing to the parents.

It is crucial that, after the observation, an individualized, detailed written report be given to the director and classroom staff (or family child care provider) in a reasonable amount of time. This report should explain what was observed to justify the low score and be easy to understand, since it will serve as the blueprint for the staff to follow in planning and implementing program improvements. In some cases a self assessment by the classroom staff is also required. It is very hard to be objective in assessing one's own practices. In order to maximize the possibility of an objective self assessment that reflects actual practices, the staff must have considerable training on the same instrument the official assessor will be using. At a minimum, the staff needs to know the correct scoring system and the basic requirements included in the scale. Most of the popular assessment instruments have manuals for training. Some have more extensive training programs. For example, the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) have complete training programs including print and video/DVD scoring activities. In addition, the ECERS and ITERS each

have a resource book that gives a complete explanation illustrated by photos for each key word and concept in the particular scale. These *All About* books help establish and maintain accurate use of the ERS. Several days of supervised field practice is also required to become a reliable scale user.

It is advantageous for staff to take a course on the instrument that will be used in the official assessment. Sometimes local R&Rs or colleges offer such courses. Studying as part of a group that is preparing for an assessment helps to calm fears and the sharing of ideas and approaches can make the process more effective.

Now we come to the most important part of a quality assessment: the plan for improvement based on the scores. No matter how good a program is, there will most likely be some areas that need improvement. Often QRIS programs provide on-site technical assistance or training for the staff of facilities involved in the program. It is very helpful to have the technical assistance provider complete a trial assessment with the instrument before the official assessor's observation. The facility should allow enough time before the official assessment for targeting improvements based on the trial assessments. Time is needed

for the staff and children to try out the TA's suggestions, make modifications, and become accustomed to the changes before the official assessment. Of course, the TA provider must be well trained to use the instrument if it is to be helpful as a basis for improvements. In addition, it is quite well known that it is difficult for the person who is providing TA to a classroom to remain neutral and objective when they conduct the assessment of their client's programs after suggested changes have been made. The emotional tie between the TA provider and the classroom staff that is such an integral part of effective technical assistance makes these assessments highly subject to 'conflict of interest.'

There should never be confusion about whether the TA's or official assessor's scores are the 'right' scores. Since the official assessor must not only be trained to a higher level of reliability, but also must be checked periodically to assure that they maintain their reliability, their scores should remain the officially accepted scores.

In order to make the best use of an official assessment and the subsequent feedback, the classroom staff should keep the following points in mind:

- Remember that the assessment observation is intended to give a realistic picture of the strengths and weaknesses of a classroom practices. It is not like the tests we took in school where we could all get 100% if we studied hard enough. Therefore, in a real life early childhood setting, the staff should aim for a good score, as high a score as they can realistically attain, not a perfect score. Any good assessment instrument has to be able to differentiate a range of quality, from low to very high. In the ERS, each item is presented as a 7 point scale, with level 1 labeled inadequate, 3 is minimal, 5 is good, and 7 is excellent. If the assessors score accurately,



there should be relatively few programs up at the excellent level, and relatively few at the inadequate level. If there are an overwhelming number of scores of 6 and above, it is likely that the scores are inflated.

- Based on the assessment results, the staff can make both short-term and long-term plans for improvement. It is advisable to focus improvement efforts first on the areas that are easier for the staff to improve. The results will have a positive effect on the classroom, which both staff and children will appreciate. The long-term goals should not be forgotten, but they may require more staffing, funding, or building modifications.
- Link each plan for improvement to a specific scale requirement that earned a score below the quality cut-off. Most QRIS programs specify a target quality score or range of scores linked to various incentives. These quality levels should be realistic and not too high for the number of programs desired at each level.
- When assessment results are reviewed, look to see if there are some general issues that caused the classroom or family child care home to get low scores on several items. Such issues include general lack of access to materials of various types for play and learning; little language stimulation; uninvolved or punitive teacher-child interactions; little to no diversity in the books, displayed pictures, or materials; or poor health and safety practices.

Last but not least, staff can remain optimistic and increasingly empowered by focusing on those items where they can create meaningful changes and not let the things they have little to no control over assume monumental proportions. Long-term goals that require infrastructure improvement or changes in regulations take more time to change, but even such goals are helped along by realistic assessments that do not falsify the problems.

No doubt, program assessments create some anxiety for the staff. However, they are effective in presenting the reality with which we must work. We can all feel encouraged because communities that are implementing changes based on assessments using well designed, standardized instruments have data to show significant changes. The teachers, children, and parents are also noticing and responding positively to these changes. Basing improvements on assessed needs is raising the professional level of the education and care we are providing for young children.

References and Resources

www.fpg.unc.edu/~ecers

This web site has many other helpful handouts for completing an assessment.

All About Preschoolers Book Sets by Kaplan available from:
www.kaplanco.com.